

## When the Towers Fell: Mourning and Nostalgia after 9/11 in HBO's The Wire

Written by Mark Chou

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MARK CHOU, MAY 25 2010

In the season three opener of HBO's crime series, *The Wire*, audiences see something that strangely resembles the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Not only that, but they see in this scene and the broader narrative arc that encompasses it the politics of mourning and nostalgia which had, by then, imbued the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 with a particular "metaphysical or national-political" meaning.[1]

As the episode begins, we see Bodie, Poot and Puddin walk into scene. They can be heard talking about the Franklin Terrace Towers. Having featured so prominently in the Barksdale's drug empire in season one, the Franklin Towers are finally set for demolition. Baltimore Mayor, Clarence Royce, announces to local residents that the Towers, "which sadly came to represent some of this city's most entrenched problems", will give way to a "new Baltimore."

As Royce details what the development will mean for the city as a whole, Bodie and Poot reminisce about the past, something which for Poot, more than Bodie, the Towers seem evocative of:

*Poot: I dunno man, I mean I'm kinda sad. Them Towers be home to me.*

*Bodie: You gonna cry about a housing project now? Man, they shoulda blow them motherfuckers up a long time ago if you ask me.*

*Poot: Man, it ain't always been bad. I mean I seen some shit up in them Towers that still make me smile, yo.*

*Bodie: You talkin' steel and concrete man, steel and fuckin' concrete.*

*Poot: No, I'm talkin' about people, memories and shit.*

*Bodie: Ain't the same.*

Shortly after the boys arrive, Royce keys the destruction. They, along with those who have gathered, fall silent.

Before them, the Towers explode and then collapse, one after the other. Almost immediately, thick plumes of smoke and ash descend to street level, engulfing the spectators who have come to see the spectacle.

In her insightful analysis of this scene, Elizabeth Bonjean argues that "[a]s at-home viewers, we are voyeurs of this fictional event, yet instantly are transported back in time to 11 September 2001 when Americans – and the world – witnessed the collapsing World Trade Center Towers".[2] Though the terrorist aspect is absent from this scene, the crumbling infrastructure of the Barksdale drug empire is very much as its centre – the war on drugs in this sense becoming an analogy for the war on terror. Indeed, both the war on drugs in *The Wire* and the war on terror in reality were brought to bear through the falling towers. The same smoke that descends from the Franklin Towers and

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engulfs the inhabitants of West Baltimore in *The Wire* had only just, a few years back, engulfed the residents of Manhattan, after the collapse of the World Trade Center. Though subtle, the allusions are nonetheless powerful.

In fact, just days before this episode went to air on 19 September, 2004, the governors of New York and New Jersey along with the Mayor of New York City had erected the cornerstone for the new Freedom Tower set to replace the World Trade Center at Ground Zero. A crucial feature of the design, it was agreed, was a memorial that would be erected to “honor and remember those who lost their lives” – a place of mourning and remembrance for the physical devastation, the loss of life and, perhaps most significantly, for the destruction of a world that had supposedly come to an end on 10 September, 2001. These things are important, as Poot conveys in *The Wire*. People, memories, the past: these are worthy of commemoration. And Poot, if not Bodie, is stricken to see them destroyed.

But nostalgia for the past can, through acts of public commemoration, transform that past into something which it was not.[3] Today, when we recall the collapse of the World Trade Center and the chain of events that followed in its aftermath, what is foremost in the minds of many is the world that was somehow altered, or even destroyed, on the morning of 11 September, 2001. In the years that followed, commemorating 9/11 became not just about remembering the senseless destruction of life. Nor was it solely about acknowledging American vulnerability and valorising its resolve. Rather, it was also about a sense of nostalgia: for the certainty, security and decency which had either been lost on 9/11 or in the insidious global conflict that quickly took hold. As the world woke on 11 September, 2001, it awoke to a world that was inexplicably new, a world that, in the view of many, had little semblance to the one they had lived in just the day before. The supposed exceptionalism of 9/11, both actual and manufactured, marked it as an unprecedented moment in world history, one which literally changed everything.[4] And because of that, nostalgia for the world that had existed previously soon became entwined with the one that was as yet unravelling.

When the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center fell, in other words, it immediately became perceived by many as “an interruption of the deep rhythms of cultural time, a cataclysm simply erasing what was there rather than evolving from anything already in place”.[5] In time, the effective physical and metaphorical erasure of the past – in one short day – caused many to long for that past; which, to them, was something they had been robbed of. It caused them to conjure up mythologised and romanticised images of that past, which was somehow better, more civilised and more ordered than the shadowy and dangerous reality they now faced.

Symbolised through the falling Towers, *The Wire* too makes audiences long for the past which was lost with the demise of the Barksdale empire and the rise to power of Marlo Stanfield. The power structure and even the game itself shifted, or so we are led to believe.

In a separate, though not unrelated, scene of season three Bunk reminds us of that past. Like Poot, he too mourns for a mythologised halcyon era where a structure, a game and rules by which it was played existed, and mattered. Speaking to Omar, Bunk recalls:

*I was a few years ahead of you at Edmondson, but I know you remember the neighborhood, how it was. We had some bad boys, for real....As rough as that neighborhood could be, we had us a community. Nobody, no victim, who didn't matter. And now all we got is bodies, and predatory motherfuckers like you....Makes me sick, motherfucker, how far we done fell.*

Echoed in Bunk and Poot is the sentiment that as vicious and violent as the past was, a sense of community, decency and justice nevertheless prevailed – skewed as it sometimes could be. Memorials should be erected in memory of this.

Yet when Bodie – who is not exempt from what is taking place around him – slates the past which Poot and Bunk speak of as nothing but “steel and concrete”, he flags for the viewing audience another conception of mourning that we, in our own societies, have tended to overlook; a nostalgia which has little to do with what the fall of the World Trade Center came to represent. We get a glimpse of what Bodie means in the scene where he opens up to McNulty:

*I feel old. I've been out there since I was thirteen. I ain't never fucked up a count, never stole off a package, never*

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*did some shit I wasn't told to do. I've been straight up. But what come back?... They want me to stand with them, right? But where the fuck they're at when they supposed to be standing by us?... This game is rigged, man. We like them bitches on the chessboard.*

This passage, unlike the previous two, reveals that what Bodie mourns most for is a loss of meaning, which took place long before the Towers fell. The sense of tragic nihilism he speaks of here has always existed, even before Barksdale's day. In fact, if we recall, D'Angelo – a tragic figure who falls by his own words – told him as much in *The Wire*'s first season: “Look, the pawns, man, in the game, they get capped quick. They be out early.” And while Bodie may not have believed it then – choosing instead to think that “Unless they some smart-ass pawns” – he does now. Marlo Stanfield's new order made overt what had always been there, implicitly.

The only difference, therefore, between then and now is not one of quality but quantity. The decline of the Barksdale empire – represented by the fall of the Franklin Towers – merely quickened and intensified a nihilism that has long existed. In the new order epitomised by Marlo Stanfield, what was broken, unjust and hollow merely became more so. It is not a dichotomy that marks the pre- and post-Tower world but, rather, a continuity.

To the extent that *The Wire* has had anything to say about the events of 9/11, which it implicitly comments upon during its five seasons, it is the message of continuity that stands out. Sure, the show gestures at the domestic socio-political changes which have set in, specifically as a consequence of the War in Iraq; FBI reprioritising from the war on drugs to the war on terror being amongst *The Wire*'s most explicit and recurrent references. But even they ultimately reaffirm a sense of sameness, something which 9/11 has done nothing to dispel. Analogies between Baltimore and Fallujah, made by policemen and politicians within the series, only further accentuate this point: war destroyed Fallujah; what destroyed Baltimore? This is all brought to bear in one particularly incisive scene in *The Wire*. As Helena Sheehan and Sheamus Sweeney recount in their analysis,

*[i]n one instance, an INS agent points out a sign for the Department of Homeland Security [where previously a sign for Immigration and Naturalization Service had hung] and asks McNulty if he feels any different. McNulty admits that he didn't vote in the 2004 election, because neither Bush nor Kerry had any idea of what was going on where he works.[6]*

In the Baltimore which McNulty lives and works in, the changes that are broadcast on the national news, by bureaucrats and in the corridors of power just miles away in Washington D.C. seem almost beside the point. Things have changed, only ostensibly. Everything else remains the same. Or, as Erika Johnson-Lewis comments in her critique of *The Wire*, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.”[7] But that is the series' point.

Too much has been made about how the world changed on 9/11. Too much has been made about how 9/11 and the ensuing global struggle against terrorism has somehow hearkened in or is representative of the decline of the American empire. And while, on the other hand, it would be altogether fraught to claim that nothing has changed, it is also true that the world which existed before 11 September, 2001 continues to exist still, both within the U.S. and elsewhere. For the vast majority of the world's population – perhaps even for the vast majority of the population within the U.S. – 9/11 was or merely became a blip on the screen. Yet, this was something rarely publicised on the national news, by bureaucrats and in the corridors of power in the years following September 11, 2001.

When series creator David Simon says that *The Wire* is about the “decline of the American empire” he is not, as such, solely or even necessarily referring to the events of 9/11 and the war on terror.[8] The rot he is speaking of, which Bodie laments and viewers see on the streets of Baltimore, has its origins much deeper and much earlier. They are as entrenched and go as far back as James Truslow Adams' 1931 invocation of the American Dream; a moniker Omar has emblazoned across his t-shirt in one episode of season two. Adams writes, in *The Epic of America*, “of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”[9]

But that dream, as Immanuel Wallerstein claims in *The Decline of American Power*, “is not an exact representation of reality.”[10] It never was. What 9/11 did, or at least should have done, was to shatter that fantasy. The American

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Dream, or rather the fallacy of the American Dream, for Wallerstein, is and has long been consonant with the limits of American military might, its economic imprudence, the dangers of American nationalism, the contradictions of its civil liberties tradition, and the global wave of anti-Americanism – all of which predate the events that took place on 11 September, 2001.[11]

Pointing the finger at capitalism, Simon makes the point that contrary to popular wisdom life is not improving for the vast majority of Americans. If anything, it may even be getting worse.[12] And it is not so much any single individual but the system as a whole that has malfunctioned.[13] Drawn in and then spat out by a vicious systemic cycle of greed and exploitation, individuals are left with little to no alternative. This problem relates to 9/11 only indirectly, at best.

When the series finally ended in 2008 it had, in some ways, left with viewers a distinctly un-American message: that the political, economic and social constructs at the heart of the American Dream are, and have long been, inseparable from its state of decay.[14] "*The Wire*", as Sheehan and Sweeney argue, "can be read as a realization that the U.S. must come to terms with the fact of its descent in the world. Neither the nation itself nor its individual citizens can go on pretending." [15] This descent was one of the causes of 9/11 and the insidious political milieu that followed, not the reverse. As Wallerstein wrote in 2003, "[t]his belief that the end of U.S. hegemony has already begun does not follow from the vulnerability that became apparent to all on September 11, 2001. [...] It was merely one important event within a trajectory that began much earlier, and will go on for several more decades".[16]

Today, we cannot forget the lives lost to 9/11 nor what the fall of the Twin Towers came to represent more broadly for world politics. As Poot and Bunk so rightly say, they are important and should be remembered. But what is also important – though all too frequently forgotten – is the need to mourn for the greater loss of meaning that marks our society, the origins of which occurred long before the Twin Towers fell. This is not easy to do and goes against a broader political construct that has, perhaps until recently, worked "hard to prevent us from looking soberly at what happened" for fear that we might stumble onto the source of the rot: that "[t]he economic, political, and military factors that contributed to U.S. hegemony are the same factors that will inexorably produce the coming U.S. decline." [17] This predicament existed prior to 9/11 and continues to exist after it. By reminding us that this is so, *The Wire* achieves something few public figures and mediums of popular entertainment did in the years proceeding 11 September, 2001: to make us mourn for more than what was lost when the Twin Towers fell.

**Mark Chou** will submit his PhD thesis at the University of Queensland in the coming weeks. In it, he examines the connections between democracy and tragedy in ancient Athens and today. His publications have appeared in *Millennium*, *Borderlands*, *Griffith Review*, the edited volume *International Relations Theory and Philosophy* and are forthcoming in *Telos*, *Journal for Cultural Research* and *Double Dialogues*. He welcomes feedback and suggestions on how to improve the ideas contained within this paper.

[1] David Simpson, *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2.

[2] Elizabeth Bonjean, "After the Towers Fell: Bodie Broadus and the Space of Memory," in Tiffany Potter and CW. Marshall (eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 163.

[3] For a critical discussion on nostalgia see Michael Janover, "Nostalgias," *Critical Horizons* (Vol.1, No.1, 2000).

[4] See Jeremy D. Mayer, *9-11: The Giant Awakens* (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2003); Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (eds.), *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of the Global Order* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002).

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[5] Simpson, *9/11*, 4.

[6] Helena Sheehan and Sheamus Sweeney, "The Wire and the world: narrative and metanarrative," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no.51, 2009, Accessed from <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/Wire/index.html> on 12 October 2009.

[7] Erika Johnson-Lewis, "The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Serial Narrative on *The Wire*," *darkmatter Journal* (Iss.4, 2009), Accessed from <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/the-more-things-change-the-more-they-stay-the-same-serial-narrative-on-the-wire/print/> on 15 March 2010.

[8] David Simon cited in Margaret Talbot, "Stealing Life: The crusader behind 'The Wire'," *The New Yorker* (22 October 2007), Accessed from [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa\\_fact\\_talbot](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/10/22/071022fa_fact_talbot) on 12 October 2009.

[9] James Truslow Adams cited in CW. Marshall and Tiffany Potter, "'I am the American Dream': Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction," in Potter and Marshall, *The Wire*, 3.

[10] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 2.

[11] Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power*, 2-3.

[12] Marshall and Tiffany Potter, "'I am the American Dream'," 4.

[13] Paul Sheehan, "Obama is walking a high wire," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 January 2009, Accessed from <http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/obama-is-walking-a-high-wire/2009/01/18/1232213445522.html> on 13 October 2009.

[14] JM. Tyree, "The Wire: The Complete Fourth Season," *Film Quarterly* (Vol.61, No.3, 2008), 38.

[15] Sheehan and Sweeney, "The Wire and the world."

[16] Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power*, 13, 1.

[17] Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power*, 13.